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ABSTRACT

A study of 186 black and 141 white college students was conducted after the televised sequel to "Roots" to ascertain viewing frequency, perception, and attitude change. Each student responded to a questionnaire consisting of 13 items related to the series and questions on demographic characteristics of the students. It was found that both heavier viewing and more favorable perception of the series were expressed by the black students. An immediate impact on racial change was felt more strongly by white respondents than by black respondents, while white students were slightly more optimistic about the potential of television for improving relationships between blacks and whites. (TJ)

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A SUPER SEQUEL TO "ROOTS": ITS IMPACT ON BLACK AND WHITE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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A Super Sequel to "Roots": Its Impact on
Black and White College Students

In recent years, the mass media have made considerable change in the manner in which minority groups, especially blacks are portrayed. Television, according to Roberts (1971) and Kassarjian (1973), has been particularly noticeable in altering the manner in which blacks are presented in entertainment programs. Reviewing an extended period, Seggar (1977) concluded that blacks have improved upon their situation on television as far as numbers and role significance. Most of these and other studies done by Bogart (1972), Carey (1966), and Greenberg (1970) have focused on the frequency of black portrayals and on the media preferences of black audiences.

The investigation of literature, however, revealed only a few studies which specifically posed questions on the effect of a particular television program with dominant black content theme and characterization on the different segment of the population until 1977 when the first series of "Roots" aired.

The present study is an initial attempt to assess the viewing and impact of the second series of "Roots" on both black and white viewers. Did blacks and whites respond similarly to the sequel? What differences were to be found in their perception of the series? Did the acceptance

of "Roots" bring the improvement of racial relations both on television and in the real world, as Wander (1977) suggested?"

The secondary aim of the study is to make parallel comparisons with the studies which reported the effects of the original series. The results reported here, in addition to earlier findings, may have practical implications for efforts at promoting successful racial integration on television and in the real world. We will consider briefly some of these implications at the end of the paper.

A number of studies on the first series of "Roots" by Surlin (1978), Johnson (1977), and Hur (1978) reported heavy exposure to the program, even though blacks viewed more than whites. In terms of post-viewing attitude change toward other-race people, a complicated pattern emerged. Overall, respondents were confident of the relevancy of the "Roots" to contemporary race relations and wanted more of this type of programming. When actual attitude change was examined, however, very little evidence was found. Surlin suggested that whites were apt to express a more favorable opinion about blacks after viewing than vice versa.

These previous studies lead to the formulation of the following hypotheses for the present investigation.

Hypothesis 1: Viewing Frequency Hypothesis

There is a significant difference in viewing of the sequel between black and white viewers. Black viewing is significantly higher than white viewing.

Hypothesis 2: Perception Hypothesis

Blacks perceive the program more favorably in its authenticity, objectivity, and dynamism than whites.

Hypothesis 3: Attitude Change Hypothesis

There is no significant racial attitude change toward other-race group as a result of viewing "Roots."

METHOD

Subjects were drawn from two universities in the Metropolitan Houston area, using random sampling. In order to make the data more comparable for black and white students, black students were oversampled from Texas Southern University, which is predominantly black with 8,000 undergraduates. Data for the white sample were largely collected from University of Houston, an urban oriented state university with 30,000 students.

A total of 327 black and white students participated in the study on February 26, 1979, the day after the completion of the final episode of the sequel. The black group comprised 186 students, while the white sample included 141 students. The average age of black sample was 21.26. The black sample consisted of 44% males and 56% females. The white sample had a mean age of 22.95 with 57% males and 43% females. Both groups included approximately equal number of freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors.

The questionnaire for the present study included 13 items on the sequel to the "Roots" plus questions on demographic characteristics, general media habits and attitudes. Separate forms were given to black students and to white students: these forms were almost identical except

the terms "black" and "white" were transposed to fit the appropriate case.

First, respondents were asked how many episodes of the sequel they watched. Secondly, to measure the respondents' perception of the program, a special set of semantic differential scales was developed. The seven bipolar scales were employed for the authenticity, objectivity, and dynamism of the series . They were chosen after a pretest on basis of their providing a wide range of responses. For these scales the students selected any one of five response categories: strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree,or strongly agree. Two further statement were added: "After watching 'Roots', did your personal attitude whites (or blacks) change?" and "Do you think television can help improve the black and white relationship in the U.S.?" The first question focused on respondents' perception of the actual affect of "Roots" upon themselves. The second item was about the potential of television on racial relations.

The questionnaire were administered by the investigator and her assistants who were taking an undergraduate research course at Texas Southern University. The standardized instruction requested candid responses and assured anonymity.

FINDINGS

Several statistical analyses including χ^2 tests and t-tests were made to test the major hypotheses.

The black and white students in the sample differed significantly in their exposure to the sequel with black respondents reporting a much

higher level of viewing than white respondents. Table 1 summarizes the results of χ^2 test on viewing frequency. This table provides a revealing mapping of black and white group differences.

Table 1 About Here

The mean number of episodes of the sequel seen by the black college students was 4.80 compared to 2.64 of the white sample. About 27% of the black group reported watching all seven episodes, compared to 11% of the white students. Only 1.1% of the black students did not watch any episode of the second series, compared to 33% of the white respondents. This finding supported the first hypothesis on viewing frequency. There was salient difference between black and white group. (χ^2=84.62, df=7, p=.001) This result was parallel to the results of earlier studies on the first series by Hur and Johnson.

The second hypothesis tested differences between the black and white viewers in their perception of the sequel. Again, racial group responses were quite different with significant t-ratios for all of the seven semantic differential scales. Comparison of means, as shown in Table 2, revealed that blacks showed more favorable assessment of the series consistently. According to Table 2, these black viewers perceived the series not only to be more accurate and unbiased, but also to be more important, pleasant, and colorful than white respondents.

Table 1.

Viewing Frequency of the Sequel to "Roots" by Race

Number of Episodes	Blacks (N=186)		Whites (N=141)	
	N	%	N	%
none	2	1.1	47	33.3
1	9	4.8	14	9.9
2	15	8.1	14	9.9
3	24	12.9	12	8.5
4	26	14.0	20	14.2
5	33	17.7	6	4.3
6	27	14.5	12	8.5
all	50	26.9	16	11.3

$\chi^2=84.62$, df=7, $p<.01$

Table 2 About Here

The potential impact of the sequel on racial attitude change was examined by asking "After watching 'Roots', did your personal attitude toward whites (or blacks) change?" Table 3 presents the results of χ^2 test. A rather substantial proportion of both blacks and whites reported no personal attitude change. About 68% of blacks indicated no change, while 61% of whites reported no change. It is significant to note, however, that 39% of the white respondents reported positive change and only 1% reported negative change. On the other hand, some 20% of the black students indicated their attitude change toward whites in a positive direction. About 12% of the black sample showed rather negative change after viewing the program.

Table 3 About Here

As shown in Table 3, the viewing experience did not apply to respondents' immediate post-viewing attitude change. These findings correspond to that of Johnson who found no racial attitude change after the original series of "Roots."

Table 2.

Mean Comparisons for Black and White Samples on the Perception of the Sequel

Scales[a] (favorable end of scales is at left)	Mean Scores[b] Blacks	Whites	t	p
accurate-inaccurate	3.43	2.40	5.39	**
unbiased-biased	2.43	2.01	2.29	*
colorful-colorless	3.30	2.60	2.02	*
important-unimportant	3.37	2.72	2.88	**
pleasant-unpleasant	3.36	2.45	4.55	**
expert-ignorant	3.41	2.55	4.29	**
easy-difficult	2.91	2.21	3.66	**

[a]The scales range from 1 to 5, with 5 being a more favorable response and 1 being a less favorable response. The larger the mean value, the more positive was a subject's reaction.

[b]The number for which the mean of each scale is computed varies.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 3.

Perceived Attitude Change After Watching the Sequel by Race

Direction	Blacks	Whites
very much positively	5.4%	6.7%
positively	14.7%	31.7%
unchanged	67.9%	60.8%
negatively	9.2%	0.8%
very much negatively	2.7%	0.0%

χ^2=22.49, df=4, p=.002

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Although the sequel to "Roots" did not quite repeat the success of the first series, it achieved the second-highest-rated week in television history, surpassed only by the original episodes. An estimated 110 million people watched all or part of the sequel. The sequel was different from the first "Roots" in two ways. First, it focused on the theme of struggle for equality rather than struggle for freedom. Second, the 14-hour sequel began in 1882, 12 years after the close of the first series, and ended in 1967, covering the lives of four generations of a black family.

The findings from the present study roughly paralleled earlier findings on the first series. As expected there was marked differences between black and white college students in their exposure and assessment of the program. Overall, heavier viewing and more favorable perception of the sequel were typically expressed by the black sample. As to the post-viewing effect on racial attitude change, an immediate impact of the sequel was greater for the white respondents than for the black respondents. Over 60% of the students in both black and white sample, nevertheless, reported no personal attitude change toward other-race group. When asked what they considered the potential of television in the improvement of black and white relationship, white students (53%) were little more optimistic than their black counterparts (48%).

What are the implications of the findings for further research?

From one perspective, an increase and change in the portrayal of blacks in television programs are desirable, especially in order to promote cross-racial understanding and appreciation. One practical implication of the results on "Roots" is that similar programs could be developed for other minority groups including American Indians, Spanish-Americans, and Oriental Americans.

Perhaps one of the most important questions to be examined in future research is the long-term effect of television programs on viewers' racial attitudes and norms. Interracial attitude and behavior were found to be affected not only by the mass media but also by other factors such as personal characteristics (like authoritarianism, intolerance of differences, self-esteem and aggressiveness), by prior racial attitudes, and by the racial attitudes of significant other (family and peers). Future research should include a wider spectrum of variables to examine the impact of television programs featuring black and other minority groups.

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